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Narrating from the Margins: Self-Representation of Female and Colonial Subjectivities in Jean Rhys's Novels

Nagihan Haliloğlu

222 pages, 2011, \$64.00 USD (hardcover)

Amsterdam, Rodopi

Reviewed by Lee Garver, Butler University

Few modernist authors have been better able than Dominican novelist Jean Rhys to grant voice, dignity, and psychological autonomy to women on the fringes of respectability in early twentieth-century Europe. In contrast to E.M. Forster, for example, who found himself completely incapable in *Howards End* of describing the inner life of Jacky Bast, the impoverished former mistress of Henry Wilcox who is said to be “bestially stupid” and trail “odours from the abyss,” Rhys made such figures, indeed “the abyss” more generally, the principal focus of her fiction (Forster, 162, 166). Whether she wrote about chorus girls, semi-employed single women, demimondaines, mistresses, or unhappy and socially isolated bohemians, Rhys explored the complex subjectivities of women who struggled to find places for themselves in societies that seemed designed to punish, or at the very least denigrate, any female who sought happiness or sexual fulfillment outside marriage or a narrowly prescribed set of gender roles. What is more, as many readers of this journal may already know, Rhys displayed a no less remarkable interest in examining the parallels and affinities between such women and colonial exiles desperately trying to survive in hostile European metropolises. Indeed, in many instances, as with Anna Morgan, the white Creole protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), her characters are doubly displaced and dispossessed, and suffer cruelly for both their supposed sexual transgressions and their inability to adapt to a world that spurns the colonial perspectives they employ to make sense of both their lives and interwar European society.

In her provocative new book, *Narrating from the Margins: Self-Representation of Female and Colonial Subjectivities in Jean Rhys's Novels*, Nagihan Haliloğlu makes the psychologies of these misunderstood figures—women and colonials pushed to the margins of society—the prism through which she examines Rhys's narrative art. Taking as her point of departure the work of narrative theorist Paul John Eakin and Rhys scholar Helen Carr, she argues that Rhys's five major novels—*Quartet* (1929), *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)—offer important insight into the ways that sexually and colonially displaced individuals attempted, not always successfully, to achieve self-possession and political agency in the face of social pressures that threatened to strip

them of the capacity for self-definition. Drawing upon Eakin, Haliloğlu contends that story and identity are immutably linked, that “narrative can be considered a cognitive instrument that helps an individual impose coherence on the otherwise chaotic nature of experience” (3). Turning to Carr, she further asserts that “Rhys’s oeuvre traces the trials and tribulations of female and white Creole protagonists as they struggle for a legitimate position from which to speak in their particular historical moment” (183). In Haliloğlu’s view, the narrators of Rhys’s novels, whether first- or third-person, are “self-narrators,” fictional selves who seek to make a cohesive story out of the amorphous subjectivity of their lives, and Rhys’s modernist experiments with narrative form, including her use of ellipses, abrupt shifts in time and perspective, and dream-like breakdowns in speech, reflect in crucial ways the efforts of her protagonists to resist being subjectivated into a social order that would rob them of the capacity for self-representation (2).

One of the particular strengths of this study is the way that it sheds light on the social, psychic, and linguistic constraints placed on women and colonials who were believed to transgress rules governing proper or respectable behavior, especially rules concerning family life and reproduction. Haliloğlu divides Rhys’s self-narrators into two main types: the “amateur” and the white Creole. The amateur, a term Haliloğlu borrows from Rhys scholar Sue Thomas, refers to the category of “the unemployed single young woman trying to survive in the European capitals between the wars by the relationships she entertains with men” (32). The white Creole refers to anyone of European descent who is born and, as a consequence, becomes acclimated to and shaped by the conditions of life in a Caribbean plantation colony. What both have in common, according to Haliloğlu, is that they are perceived by members of respectable European society to be vessels of unbridled sexuality and racial impurity. The amateur’s unregulated sexual freedoms were believed to threaten family and inheritance through unchecked fertility, the purity of race through the spread of disease, and the institution of marriage through the undermining of restraint and moral virtue. The white Creole’s intimacy with Africans and Afro-Caribbean culture raised similar fears of miscegenation, cultural impurity, and divided allegiances. As Haliloğlu skillfully reveals throughout the volume under review, these prejudices are the source of much of the anguish and pain suffered by Rhys’s protagonists and self-narrators. Denied a voice or a comfortable place within British and European familial structures, the Rhysian heroine becomes alienated from both her environment and body. She finds it difficult, if not impossible, to express her views in language that will be comprehended by most of her interlocutors, and this is in the end what leads Rhys’s self-narrators to employ modernist narrative modes that give expression both to feelings of loss and lack of agency—what Haliloğlu terms the “zombie” mode of narration—and feelings of anger and rebellion—what she terms the “mad witch” mode of narration (56, 57). The former produces instances of “dysnarrativia,” silence or arrested and

unintelligible speech (19). The latter produces fragmented and dream-like ruptures in conventional discourse that make possible the articulation of truths that cannot otherwise be easily voiced. It also encourages the collage-like embedding of other marginalized voices into the fabric of the narrative, thereby creating a community of life stories in which the self-narrator's own life and predicaments make greater sense.

Although the themes and issues that Haliloğlu explores in her study are not particularly new or groundbreaking, either in terms of Rhys scholarship or postcolonial cultural analysis, the attention she gives to the role of narrative in shaping these themes offers fresh perspectives on Rhys's fiction. By highlighting the manner in which Rhys's self-narrators seek to achieve self-possession, Haliloğlu illuminates the critical role that Rhys's modernist experiments with language and narrative play in giving political meaning to her novels. She also makes more apparent the common metaphors that link Rhys's fictional reflections on gender, race, and colonialism. I finished reading her volume with a renewed appreciation for Rhys's literary achievement and importance to postcolonial studies, and I strongly encourage anyone with an interest in Rhys to give Haliloğlu's work their attention. If the book occasionally loses focus or neglects to provide compelling textual support for its claims, these weaknesses do not take away from the volume's overall significance or its deft synthesis of the work of other scholars.

Works Cited

Forster, E. M. *Howards End: Authoritative Text, Textual Appendix, Background and Contexts, Criticism*. Ed. Paul B. Armstrong. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998. Print.